

Statement Recognizing Martin Luther King Day

Mr. President. Earlier this week, our nation celebrated Martin Luther King Day. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have been 77 years old on January 16. It was a day to reflect on the life of a man admired for the dream he dreamed for America, and for his words and deeds in pursuit of it.

He dreamed, as he famously said, “that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’ ” Dr. King argued, in words that stir the heart, that racial segregation must end in the South, and that black Americans must be granted their citizenship rights throughout the land and throughout our institutions: in education, in employment, in housing, and in the voting booth.

His role in the push for full voting rights for African Americans is well known but bears repeating. In the spring of 1965, a national television audience was shocked by broadcasts of state troopers and sheriff’s deputies brutally repulsing voting rights protesters in Selma, Alabama. Hours later, Dr. King declared: “No American is without responsibility.” He went to Alabama and led a march, under federal protection, from Selma to the state capital. The event garnered national support and provided momentum for congressional passage of the Voting Rights Act later that year.

Dr. King appreciated the blessings of freedom; he wanted them for his people, and for all people. We remember this Protestant minister’s eloquence and also his sense

of spiritual mission – he was an ecumenical religious leader who brought people of all faiths, all races, together in mutual respect for one another.

As Taylor Branch, his biographer, put it: “His oratory fused the political promise of equal votes with the spiritual doctrine of equal souls.”

His belief in nonviolent protest convinced those who listened to him that here was the high road to vindicating the rights of black people in this country. It is a bitter fact that he lost his life to violence – he was only 39 when an assassin’s bullet cut him down in Memphis -- and it makes us understand his great courage in taking on the burden of leadership.

In officially celebrating the life of Dr. King, we celebrate the end of legal segregation and the many inroads we have made against racism and discrimination. Of course there is more we must do to make sure all Americans enjoy the blessings of freedom. He would tell us that, if he were here. He would also insist that we continue on in his way: with passion and with civility, calling on our fellow human beings to act on their best instincts, not their worst.

Dr. King, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, is a model here and around the world -- from China, and the 1989 anti-government protests in Tiananmen Square, to South Africa, where apartheid rule gave way in 1990 without provoking the civil war many had feared. In encouraging the holding of free elections and the formation of institutions of civil society in faraway places today, we promote the idea that Martin Luther King put forward so well: that the nonviolent settling of differences among men is the bedrock of democracy.

Let us all take inspiration from the King legacy this week, Mr. President, and every week.